

CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS

We are about to head into a maze of details, questions, unprovable theories. I am mostly delighted about this. I learned long ago that so-called laypeople are not stupid. A few of you may still try to hang on to the mystique that only Bible scholars and seminary professors can understand the Bible. But few of you would argue that only Bible scholars and seminary professors can be Christians. And in fact, many of them are more agnostic than most of us. Another fact is that vast numbers of Christians have found inspiration, instruction, understanding, and encouragement from the Bible for thousands of years. So this particular mystique about laypeople not being able to deal with the Bible is ridiculous.

It is, in my opinion, a serious mistake for any Christian to leave biblical study and understanding to others, no matter how expert they may seem. That way we get popes and priests and people like me running the church, instead of the Holy Spirit leading the faithful followers of Jesus.

It is not unusual for background details to be important to our understanding and comprehension of what's going on. Some of you have family members and friends, and you know very well that knowing more about their background, what they have come through, what their childhood was like, etc., helps you to care more about them and to understand them better. It gives you depth and perspective. Biblical studies, if they are open and honest, do the same thing for the Bible.

So, some of this you already know. I may even repeat a few things several times. I am hopeful that by the time we move on, you will be familiar enough with this part of the New Testament that you will feel okay about talking to other people about it. Do you see the difference? In most churches, it's just fine to walk away from a worship service or class and have only a vague and general impression of what has been said. But when that's the case, nobody is going to take it from there and try to teach it to anybody else. If the early church had tried to go on that basis, the whole Message and Mission of Jesus would have died in a few years. Therefore, that cannot be okay in *The New Church*. If I teach it or preach it, you have not heard it yet – until you can teach it and preach it

yourself. So if you lost concentration, or if I never made it very clear in the first place, we aren't finished yet. Hope you will remember that tonight, and next Sunday, and from now on.

All right: Biblical studies are a lot like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, only it's an old puzzle with some of the pieces missing. You work the puzzle the best you can, and eventually you see some of the picture emerging. But always some of the pieces are missing. Even then, though, in many cases you can at least see the shape of the missing pieces.

Real life is more about plausibility than it is about absolute certainty. So is good history. The fetish in modern times for absolute proof and absolute certainty has yielded some interesting theories, but mostly it has traded truth for small facts, and meaning for an ever-expanding cloud of doubt that is neither helpful, useful, nor necessary to authentic human life. Answers to factual questions are important, and intelligent people will of course seek them. But answers to questions about how we should live, who we are, what we should live for, whether there are any goals or values *worth* living for – science has absolutely nothing to say about such questions. Such questions are in a different category and are inaccessible to objective facts. They can only be approached by subjective inquiry that can lead to choices and commitments which depend on faith and trust. We have to be subjective in order to enter the interior areas of spiritual awareness. You cannot use objective approaches to enter into prayer, quiet, and very real but unprovable experiences and confrontations with God.

But we are still talking about Paul's letter to the Colossians. In my case, at least, that means I want to know more about Colossae, and what it was like in Paul's time.

Ephesus was the greatest city in Asia (you call it Asia Minor) in Paul's time. It was the second greatest city in the Roman Empire, second only to Rome itself, and was a great port city on the Aegean Sea. Also at this time, rivers were pouring silt into the harbors of most of the port cities of Asia. Troy is far from the coast today, for instance, though it was once a port city. In Paul's time, the port at Ephesus was already silting up; as a result, Smyrna would soon be the more important city, and Ephesus would become a ghost town. That doesn't illuminate anything for us about the letter to Colossae or the letter to the Ephesians, but we stumble onto lots of information when we go looking for it. Some pieces are more useful than others. We never know until after we find

them which pieces of the puzzle will help us to see the picture more clearly.

About one hundred miles due east of Ephesus are the tri-cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae. Colossae is the furthest east of the three. From Ephesus you travel up the Meander River, then the Lycus River valley past Laodicea to Colossae. In the fifth century B.C., Colossae had been the most important city in the region. But by Paul's time, Laodicea had become the major city of the area, and Colossae was only a small town. However, Colossae was still on the major east-west road running from Pisidian Antioch through Colossae, Laodicea, and on to Ephesus. You have already heard me complain about statements that Paul had never visited Colossae. It is difficult to imagine Paul going from Pisidian Antioch to Ephesus on his third journey without walking through Colossae. But it is also curious that Paul would write a letter to such a small and insignificant town unless there were extenuating circumstances. *Colossians* is a letter written to the church at Colossae, but Paul would not have written such a letter unless there were some unusual and compelling reasons for doing so.

So we discover the first important piece of the puzzle as a result of wanting to know the background information: Colossae was a small and unimportant town. Remember, this was the tail end of Paul's third journey. Paul had traveled to Ephesus in about 52 A.D. and founded a church there. His Ephesian ministry would be the longest stay (in one city) of his entire career. Sometime in about 55 A.D., Paul would leave Ephesus and head for Jerusalem, via Corinth, Philippi, and Troas. But that's another exciting story, and doesn't concern us at the moment.

Paul was a seasoned and canny apostle/evangelist by the time he reached Ephesus. He had learned that if he could found a church in a major city, it would seed other churches in all the surrounding towns and villages. Why get beaten or stoned in a little town where only a few would ever hear about Jesus, when you could get into just as much trouble in a large city? If you could establish a church in a major population center, then the Message would go like waves into all the surrounding territory.

A year or two into the Ephesian ministry and sure enough, Paul has run into trouble. Of course! If you carry a Message about love, forgiveness, healing, caring about your neighbor, and the promise of everlasting Life, naturally you will run into big trouble in our kind of

world. Especially if some people start to take the Message seriously. So Paul is once again in prison, and that means he has more time to write letters. But there is a further wrinkle: Paul and a runaway slave named Onesimus have somehow met each other. Onesimus has become a Christian, and Paul and Onesimus have become really good friends – whether before or after Paul was sent to prison, we do not know.

What we do know is that Onesimus' master is a man named Philemon. Philemon lives in Colossae and, in fact, the church at Colossae meets in his house. Not only that, but somehow Paul and Philemon have also met somewhere along the way, and they are also dear friends. If you were to ask me, I would suggest that Paul and Philemon became friends when Paul was walking from Pisidian Antioch to Ephesus and stopped off in Colossae for several weeks. Now, this is a piece of the puzzle that we do not have. We can only guess from the shape of the missing piece.

But we do have Paul's letter to Philemon. Around the edges of the missing piece, it is clear that Paul knows Philemon rather well. The two have a strong bond with each other, and it is a bond in Christ Jesus. The tone and flavor of the letter to Philemon make it very clear, I think, that the bond between Paul and Philemon is strong enough to bear a lot of teasing, a lot of effrontery, and, beneath that, a lot of respect, affection, and trust. If you are reading the commentaries, it seems to me that some of them are analyzing the text pretty well, but are not thinking enough about the relationship between Paul and Philemon that the letter reveals.

In any case, Colossians and Philemon are written at the same time, and sent to Colossae via Tychicus and Onesimus. The most important purpose of these letters is the situation which has arisen around Onesimus. As a runaway slave, Onesimus is in peril. He not only ran away, but he stole some of his master's money so he would have the wherewithal to make good his escape and his survival. All expectations in the Roman Empire at this time are that if Onesimus is caught, the consequences will be somewhere between severe punishment and death. By the way, any person who harbored a runaway slave was liable to a fine that would pay back the owner for the days that slave had missed work.

In this case, Onesimus has not been caught; he has returned to Colossae and to Philemon of his own free will. But that alone will not save him. Onesimus is still subject to whatever punishments Philemon decides are appropriate. However, Onesimus does return with Tychicus,

and with the letters of Paul to Philemon and to the congregation at Colossae.

We do not have the answers to nearly all of our questions. But we do have some very plausible answers we did not have before. Paul was not writing to the small town of Colossae simply because there was a church there. He was writing to Colossae because that was where Onesimus had come from, and that was where he needed to go: back to his master to square things in preparation for a possible, hoped-for new life – as a free man, and as an increasingly effective Christian leader. As most of you know, the probability (not the proven fact), with significant evidence to support it, is that Onesimus eventually became the Bishop of Ephesus, and may even have been responsible for collecting and saving the letters of Paul that could be found – and that this is what preserved them for our New Testament. Some romantics, like me, even think that as Bishop of Ephesus, Onesimus sent his old master, Philemon, on the mission to find and gather all the letters of Paul that could still be found. At least there is only one personal letter in our collection of Pauline writings, and there is only one person who was likely to have a copy of that letter. And that, of course, is the person to whom it was written: Philemon. By the way, is there any reason to suppose that Philemon actually freed Onesimus, as Paul's letter was clearly requesting? Yes, of course! The very fact that the letter to Philemon was preserved is strong evidence indeed. If in fact Philemon had rejected Paul's appeal and disagreed with what Paul was suggesting, would he have saved the letter? So you see, while we do not have all the pieces of the puzzle, we have a lot more of the pieces than some people want to admit.

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Two more items while we are looking into background details.

1.) Did Paul write the letter to Colossae (the Colossians)?

First of all, who is doubting this, and why? Actually, a fair number of New Testament scholars have claimed that Paul is not the author of Colossians. Let us be fair: It is a scholar's job to ask questions. It is a scholar's task to wonder if assumptions are adding up. Beyond that, there is no body of literature in the world that gets questioned more minutely, more carefully, or with as much personal prejudice (both for and against) than the New Testament writings. (The Old Testament is a close second.)

It is also true, certainly in my case, that all of us have mind-sets and perspectives that are important to us. If I find evidence to suggest that Jesus is stupid, wrong, or immature, I will reject it. I may try to consider it fairly, but such a conclusion would have to fight a very steep uphill battle in my mind. I have studied for years and come again and again to very different conclusions about Jesus. As a result, I am no longer “open-minded” on the subject, as many would say. And that is obviously true, though I might be tempted to retort that the only reason for having an open mind is to close it on some things that are valuable.

All scholars, though not all of them admit it, have their own prejudices and perspectives. Many liberal scholars are very eager to discredit everything they can in the New Testament. They say that everything was written much later than it appears to be, and that very few writings were written by the people the writings claim as their authors. Of course, this is often true, and it is sometimes true of assumptions tacked on later. For instance, most people assume that the Gospel of Matthew was written by Levi, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. Yet no thoughtful reader can imagine that the Gospel of Matthew is an eyewitness account. It speaks with far too much distance between the writing and what was going on. And why would one of the twelve disciples copy so much from Mark, who was only a teenager at the time of the events being written about? “I was there, but I will copy what Mark said about what happened”? Mark himself was no eyewitness either. He was alive at the time and doubtless had seen Jesus many times – his mother’s house was a favorite gathering place for Christians – but Mark wasn’t *following* Jesus at the time. However, Mark knew a lot of the people who were. So we get from Mark the stories and accounts that he gathered and wrote down once Jesus was gone, and once Mark realized how important it was and how many people were increasingly eager to know everything they could learn about Jesus.

We don’t have all the pieces we want; we only have the pieces we have. Paul is the earliest writer of New Testament material. Mark, you remember, went on the first part of the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas. How soon after that did Mark start collecting notes and stories about Jesus? In other words, how soon after that did Mark start gathering notes toward the writing of Mark’s Gospel? Again, we have questions with uncertain answers. I suspect that Mark’s written notes, stories, and anecdotes about Jesus were being copied and distributed long before the “Gospel of Mark” as we know it was completed (if it ever was completed). Why do different “ancient authorities” (as the footnotes

call them) differ regarding the text? People often jump to the conclusion that it was chicanery. I think it far more likely that it reflects the fact that people were so eager for information about Jesus that they were continually copying off what Mark had written “so far” and sending it to friends (or churches) here and there.

At what point do we imagine Mark suddenly realizing that the information he was collecting about Jesus was really important to the early churches? And at what point in this process do we imagine Mark finally (or suddenly) issuing his final authentic, authoritative, and finished version of this information – his Gospel of Mark? In real life, you see, things don’t happen that way. Mark was just going from day to day, doing the best he could – just like we do. His Gospel about Jesus was a work in progress. He was adding more to it all the time, as he ran into people who were there and who had stories to tell about what they remembered. More and more of them were telling Mark their stories and anecdotes as they learned that Mark was writing it all down. Often we are trying to get precision answers without any attempt to consider or imagine what the real situation must have been like.

So why doubt that Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians? People have analyzed the vocabulary (word usage) of Colossians in comparison to the more established writings of Paul. Established by what? Consensus, mostly. First Thessalonians, Galatians, First and Second Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, Romans – all have been questioned, but few have seriously doubted that Paul wrote them. (Though many continue to play with various editing maneuvers.) I often wonder how much scholarship is based on “what I like and agree with.” If I agree, Paul wrote it. If I don’t agree with what’s being said, then Paul didn’t write it. We are all tempted to read the Bible in this way. Marcion did it dramatically. So did Thomas Jefferson. So why not me? It sure makes reading the New Testament a lot easier and more pleasant.

Anyway, many scholars have said that Colossians was not written by Paul. They say it shows a different word usage from the more accepted letters. Others have said that the “situation” being addressed in Colossians is coming from a much later period. (That is, that the message of Colossians is mostly addressing a gnostic heresy which had not yet developed in Paul’s time.) Others have claimed that they can detect a theological perspective which is different from Paul’s more authentic letters. All very interesting musings, we might agree. But from my perspective, all very flimsy arguments for concluding that Paul is not the

author. Analysis of word usage is far from solid evidence. Normal people write letters that “sound” different in language usage, depending on whom they are writing to and what the situation is. It turns out that under computer analysis, the percentage of different words is not greater between Colossians and accepted letters than it is between some of the accepted letters themselves. I can detect a difference (a softening of the insulting confrontation about “the Law”) between Galatians and Romans, but nobody doubts that Paul wrote both of them. Paul learns and grows. And Paul has no interest or awareness about being as consistent or one-dimensional as some of his readers want him to be.

Neither you nor I would trust my opinions on such matters if I were the only one to make such comments. But G.B. Caird and N.T. Wright – and numerous other exceedingly fine New Testament scholars – point out the same and additional flaws in the case being made against Pauline authorship. (If you are interested, the easiest access to such information is found in N.T. Wright’s commentary on Colossians and Philemon in the *Tyndale Commentaries* series.)

It is also a truism that in most cases, the simplest explanation is more likely than the more complicated explanation. Why would anybody trust theories that “cut up” the story of what’s happening and offer no better explanations for what’s happening – in fact, which offer nothing but exceedingly far-fetched scenarios that assume purposeful dishonesty, with no explainable motive or benefit – unless those looking to trust such theories had some strange motives or purposes of their own? Tychicus and Onesimus carried letters to Colossae, Philemon, and Laodicea (which we will discuss more in another class); scholars no longer question that the letter to Philemon is an authentic letter from Paul. So on what basis do we accept the Tychicus-Onesimus carriers and the Philemon-in-Colossae destination, but willy-nilly suppose that the letter to the Colossians is not part of this story?

Harry Emerson Fosdick used to say, “It is fine to doubt, but don’t forget to doubt your doubts.” I suggest that a lot of modern liberal scholarship forgets to doubt its doubts.

I strongly suggest that you trust that Paul wrote Colossians ... at least until somebody comes up with a really plausible reason, backed by serious evidence, that Paul did not write Colossians. Up to the present moment, no such case exists against the Pauline authorship of Colossians.

2.) Where was Colossians (and therefore Philemon) written from?

Most of the commentaries you read (until recent times) will say that Paul wrote Colossians from his imprisonment (house arrest) in Rome, quite near the end of his life. Mostly I suspect this was because not much was known about the Ephesian imprisonment. (The book of Acts did not say much about it.) But again, G.B. Caird and N.T. Wright have made strong cases for taking the Ephesian imprisonment seriously, and for thinking that Colossians (hence Philemon, Ephesians, maybe Corinthians, and maybe even Philippians) was written from Ephesus during Paul's imprisonment there. Rome is a long way from Colossae – in Paul's day, a normal three or four months of travel time under ordinary circumstances. There seems to be a much closer proximity between Paul and Philemon in this correspondence. Paul comments to Philemon that he will probably come visit him in person when he gets out of prison. From Ephesus this is believable, but from Rome? We know that Paul planned to go to Spain if/when he got out of his Roman imprisonment. Colossae is a long way and a long time in the wrong direction from Rome. Was Paul just flat-out lying to try to threaten Philemon into releasing Onesimus from slavery? That is what many scholars have suggested. And that flies in the face of everything we know about the letter, and everything we know about Paul.

Colossians was written from Ephesus, and that also changes the date to approximately 53-54 A.D. (instead of 60-65 A.D.).

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One quick, not very helpful comment. Sometimes in biblical scholarship (and many other kinds of scholarship), one author quotes another without bothering to check back into the reasons or logic of how a conclusion was reached in the first place. This sets things up for the perpetuation of errors. It is also true that all of us live on this level. That is, we take many things for granted, and we repeat many things because we heard them from somebody else, who also got them second-hand (or third or tenth). Nobody has time or maybe even expertise enough to keep checking for the accuracy of all the information we are assuming. In addition, it is also true that if you are a scholar, there is a certain need called "publish or perish." If you write books or articles that sound pretty much like what everybody has already heard or written, who's going to pay any attention to you? So a lot of modern scholarship is

being driven by the need to say things that sound different, unusual, or outlandish. (*The Da Vinci Code*, for instance, made a huge splash, and made Dan Brown a great deal of money, even though its premises are total hogwash.)

Many times and in many ways, this need to be outlandish and startling does not help us to think clearly about the Bible or our faith. Media-driven scholarship (shocking headlines, attention-getting gimmicks) is nearly always a distortion. Beyond that, many fine and careful scholars are misquoted by the media (magazine articles, newspaper headlines, people in interviews on television, etc.). A fast-paced culture like ours is constantly giving summaries of what somebody said, and that often turns out to be a serious distortion of what was *actually* said. It takes time, often quite a while, to give a balanced account of what a scholar is really trying to say. If a fast-act, wow-the-public artist removes all the humble, careful, and more accurate comments of a sincere and honest scholar, the impression given to the viewers or readers is often very far from what was really said or meant. Yet if the scholar objects or tries to correct the misimpression, ten people might hear it. Meanwhile, the thousands who heard the distortion go around misquoting this same scholar – and, in the process, often leave the impression that some very knowledgeable person has just proved that the Bible is not to be trusted, believed, or taken seriously.

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So what does it matter if Paul did not write one of the letters that bears his name? I am often asked this by people who should know better. They say things like, “Why don’t we just listen to each letter for its own value? Who cares who wrote it?” But I know almost nobody who takes a Pauline letter very seriously once they are convinced that Paul did not write it. A few scholars I have read *do* manage this; Ralph P. Martin, for instance, is a wonderful exception in his commentary on Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon in the *Interpretation* series. On the other hand, some authors, once they have decided that Paul did not write Second Thessalonians, Ephesians, or Colossians – for example, the authors of *The Authentic Letters of Paul*, which I mentioned to you last week – do not even bother to include them in their book. How could they say it more clearly: “You don’t even need to bother to read these letters ever again because we have decided that Paul did not write them.”

Here is the important point: If Paul did not write it, then the situation, the setting – the context, *whatever* it is – is entirely different from what we have been assuming. Friends, that *has* to change things. If I write down some of the things about my wife that are really meaningful and important to me about her and then you read them, it might tell you quite a bit about Mariana. If, after several years of assuming you knew things about Mariana from reading what I wrote about her, you suddenly discovered that in fact I did *not* write this account in the first place but that another person did – that someone who had never known her had written these things about her – would that not change your opinion about the value of this account about Mariana? Of course, even if I did write the account, you still have to wonder about how accurate my impressions and observations might be, but at least since you know that I have lived with Mariana for fifty-five years, that *does* give you reason to believe that I do know something about her.

In short: It *does* matter who is writing, and the date and the context are important. Some people just don't want to be bothered with the details. At least not until they find some subject they are really interested in. Then suddenly they know all the scores, all the batting averages, all the teams, all the coaches, etc. (Just to use one illustration.) And then I get *my* chance to say that the details are really boring and irrelevant.